

Eliminating child-care deserts would boost province's economy, report says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If the provincial government truly wants to aid the post-pandemic recovery, help Manitobans get back to work and invest in the future, it should start by getting rid of "child care deserts" and overhaul funding for early childhood education, experts say.

Six in 10 Winnipeg children and eight in 10 rural kids live in an area where there are either none, or too few, facilities, says a report by University of Manitoba sociologist Susan Prentice, released Tuesday.

Across the province, there is a child care space for just 18.8 per cent of Manitoba's children between the ages of 12 weeks and 12 years — much lower than the Canada-wide average of 27.2 per cent, according to "Progressive Pricing: Making Childcare More Affordable in Manitoba."

The study of Manitoba's regulated child care fees, and the degree to which they are affordable to parents, was published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in Manitoba, on the eve of Wednesday's speech from the throne to open the new sitting of the legislature.

The think tank anticipates policy changes will be included in the speech, after the provincial government commissioned a \$599,000 review by KPMG on the financing of child care.

Prentice said in an interview she's concerned the situation could be made worse. There may be incentives offered to companies to set up for-profit daycares. There may be "demand-side funding" for consumers to pay for child care, but nothing that establishes new, much-needed centre spaces, said Prentice.

"This government has a maniacal preference for family or home-based child care over centres," she said.

Although child care centres provide 92 per cent of licensed spaces and home-based daycares provide only eight per cent, the province keeps pinning its hopes on expanding home-based daycares, Prentice said.

Half of them close after four years, and very few operators have early childhood education training, she said.

"It's like repeatedly betting on a losing horse."

Revenue has been frozen for child care centres in Manitoba; most are non-profits set up by parents because the province doesn't establish new ones, the report says.

Parent fees were last set in 2013, and provincial operating grants were last set in 2016. Because of frozen revenue, facilities have had to find ways to cut costs, contributing to keeping wages low for trained early-childhood educators.

Low wages have negative effects on quality of care, as centres find it challenging or impossible to recruit and retain trained staff, the report says. Close to 30 per cent of child-care centres chronically can't meet the provincial standards for staffing, the report says, because they can't recruit and retain adequate numbers of qualified educators.

Meanwhile, it found most low-income parents in Manitoba are priced out of child care; incomes have to be at least \$10,000 under the poverty line to qualify for a maximum-fee subsidy. For nearly 60 per cent of Manitoba's moderate-income families, who make up about 55 per cent of the population, child care fees consume more than 10 per cent of net family income.

The report calls for progressive pricing for child care in Manitoba. It modelled the affordability effects if child care fees are between five and 10 per cent of net family income, with a new increased daily maximum fee. It found 19 out of 20 Manitoba parents would pay less under progressive pricing.

If the province builds more affordable child care spaces to meet demand, within a decade they would pay for themselves with increased productivity and the tax revenue generated, the report says.

Related link: [Progressive pricing: Making child care more affordable in Manitoba](#) ^[3]

U of M prof recommends sliding scale for child-care costs ahead of throne speech [4]

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